

Interview with  
Mr. J. W. Kennedy, Manager  
San Gabriel Farm Labor Association  
Irwindale, California  
August 10, 1957

I have been associated with the Bracero Program since late in 1942.

I have been connected with it as a Department of Labor representative; as a Department of Agriculture representative; as a grower and foreman; and now as a manager of a camp. I guess I have seen the program from more different points of view and for a longer period of time than just about anybody else you could find. On the basis of my experience and observations, I can say that I feel you are truly on the track of something important. Back in the early days of the program, the Braceros used to be scared to death of going to a doctor and they were even more scared of going to a hospital. ~~This~~ Time and again, I hear the say, 'If I go, I will never come out of there alive,'. Men with acute appendicitis even were unwilling to go to the hospital when ~~they~~ were told they should. They would hold out until the appendix ruptured and they were so far gone, they didn't care what happened to them. I would say this was true throughout the 1940's.

In My opinion, a big changeover occurred when the off-the-job insurance program began. You might almost say that their attitude has done a complete reversal. In the first place, they feel that they are getting cheated if they don't see the doctor; because of course, they are all paying for this insurance. They are not accustomed to the concept of group insurance in Mexico and ~~feel~~ they feel that it is practically required that they ~~get~~ something for their money, or else they are being taken for a sucker. So when the end of their contract time draws near, if they have not had any occasion to see the doctor, they will simply go in to see him for the sake of seeing him. We had a man here very recently

who went, shortly before he was due to be repatriated, and insisted that he wanted some X-rays taken of him. The ~~water~~ doctor said, "But, there is nothing wrong with you, why do you want X-rays taken?", and the man said, "I just want to make sure. I want to see what kind of health I am in with my own eyes." That is the way it goes now. They go in at the slightest suspicion that they may have something wrong or ~~that~~ they go in simply to make sure that they are in good health.

The most serious deficiency in the health provisions of the Bracero Program, is in the screening that takes place at the reception centers. The screening is such that it can only pick out the outstanding physical defects and diseases. The doctors are hopelessly understaffed and facilities are hopelessly inadequate to handle 3,000 men per day-- which is what they get at El Centro during rush season. There are for example, no facilities for holding the men overnight, which is what would be required for many types of diagnostic work. The result is, that we have a very large number coming in with chronic tonsillitis. Our doctor tells me that a large proportion should have their tonsils out before they even come into the country. He tells me that we get a lot of ~~hark~~ heart cases, also and this causes us a great deal of worry, because working in the citrus; they frequently have to work at the tops of ladders which are 20 or 26 feet high, and if they had an attack while they were up there and they fell; you can appreciate the trouble we would be in. We would like to send our own doctor down to El Centro to give a special screening to those men bound for our camp. The doctor is willing and we have proposed this seriously to the authorities. In fact, I began proposing it as long as 10 years ago, but I ran into a number of problems. For example, there is the problem of timing, let us say, we go to recruit 150 men; ~~it~~ it would take our doctor two days to do thorough physicals on all these men. Well, as I indicated before, the

reception center is simply not geared to hold men this long. We would throw the whole process out of whack, and for this reason, among others, we have never gotten very far with our proposals. I will say this, that each succeeding year the U.S. Public Health Service does a little better job at screening the men as they learn more and more from experience.

One of the things that we are intrigued by is the matter of weight. We have a strong suspicion that most men return to Mexico weighing 10 pounds or so more than they did when they arrived. Up to now, we have had no way to check this, since I know for a fact, that there is no provision for weighing the men in the physical examination they receive in El Centro. What we would have to do would be to get some scales here in the camp and weigh a group when they have first arrived. We would have to make sure that they were men that were not up here on contract before and then we would have to weigh them just as they were being ~~shipped~~ shipped back. It would be a very interesting study, but it would take a little time, since we don't have men going in and out so fast as all that; and besides, many of the men we get in here ~~are~~ transferred to us from other camps.

On the matter of sanitation, I would say that the business of taking showers is very important. When the men first arrive here, we are lucky if we can get them to take a shower on an average of once a week. Many, many of them have never seen a shower before. I recall one time when we happened to be making an inspection of the shower-house and we saw a man with his clothes on standing besides one of the shower-heads; he would turn on the hot water for a few seconds and stick his hand under it, then he would turn off the water and wait a little while, and then turn it back on and repeat the process. We watched him for sometime wondering what in the world he was doing. Finally we asked him, "What are you doing?" He looked at us in wonderment and he said, "Does it come out ~~hot~~ every time?" Now after a man has been here for a month

or two, he will insist on having his shower everyday and there is nothing that you could do to stop him even if you wanted to. Now, hand in hand with this go a lot of other things. The men groom themselves and dress more neatly and in general take care of themselves better then they have ever been accustomed to. Before.

When they first arrive here, I guess you have a pretty good idea of the kind of clothes that they ~~had~~ tend to be wearing. Everything they own is on their back, but it doesn't take long to change all that. We figure that on an average, our men buy a foot-locker full of clothing and similar articles every three months; so if a man stays with us a year when he is repatriated, he is quite likely to take back with him four foot lockers full of belongings. There is supposed to be a limit on the amount of personal effects that we are supposed to transport free, but in fact, we are willing to tranport anything within reason. We had to turn one man down who wanted to take a horse down with him on the bus. Frequently, when we send a Greyhound bus full of men down to El Centro, we will have to dig into our pockets and pay for a separate turck to take down all their stuff.

The men are free, of course, to do their shopping anywhere they want, and many of them go into Azusa. Some go as far as Los Angeles to buy things, but for the most part, I suspect that they do their purchasing from vendors, who come right here to the camp. We have, perhaps, half a dozen men who own these mobile stores that you may have seen; and they operate under our very close supervision. For example, we do not permit them to take the men's money with the promise that they will deliver the goods later. Everything is cash on the barrelhead. For another, thing we check their prices to make sure that they are in line with the prices in town. Actually it is hardly necessary for us to do this, since the men themselves are extremely price conscious and if one of the vendors

is charging more than the stores in Azusa, he simply won't get any business. I recall an example, where one of our men wanted to buy a pair of work shoes which cost, maybe 6 or \$8; it seemed that the vendor here at the camp was asking 10¢ more than one of the stores in town, so this man went all the way into town and back to save a dime. I realize that some camps don't permit these salesmen to come around, but we encourage it. We think it is a good thing to have the business close to home, where we can keep an eye on it. These vendors understand, without any question, that if ~~xx~~ they pull one sharp practice they are going to be out on their ear right now. (Cashing checks)

As far as recreation is concerned, the men all love music. They love to listen to the radio and they get musical programs on the television set we have here. A lot of them like to spend ~~their~~ leisure time reading. You would be surprised at how many of them subscribe to the 'La Opinión' the newspaper which is published in Los Angeles. And I think this is a very interesting trend, because of the fact, that even though this is printed in Spanish it is an American newspaper and the men are bound to be exposed to new ideas in this way. Another thing they are very fond of is the Spanish movies. There is a theater in Azusa that they go to frequently on a special bus, that takes them in and out for 25¢ each way. On weekends or days-off, some of them, of course, like to go into Los Angeles to look around and shop and so forth.

We try to get priests to come into the camp here whenever we can. It is not always possible. A few months ago the Bishop for this area, assigned some missionaries here for ~~xx~~ awhile and they came into camp every Sunday and the men, of course, were very happy about this and ~~so~~ were we. The missionaries have now been transferred away from this area now however. So, about the best we can do now is to get Father Cosgrove

to come in here from Azusa whenever he can, but unfortunately this is not regular. ~~28~~ Ninety-eight per cent or so of these men are good Catholics and when they don't have Mass here in camp, they like to go to the local church, but, the problem there is that it is a very small church and can't accommodate all the townspeople plus the men from the camp.

I would say that relations between the braceros and the townspeople are very good. We used to have our camp in Puente, we were forced to move from there in 1943. And before we settled on this spot, we surveyed all the areas around here carefully to find the one in which there would be the least likelihood of discrimination; we settled here on that basis. Another thing that enters into the picture is that we always impress upon the men who are first coming in, that they have important responsibilities of their own, as far as getting along with the local people is concerned. And I must say also that the priests have done a tremendous job in cementing good relationships between the Mexican-National and the local people of Mexican origin. I suppose that every once in awhile there is a little scrape in one of the local cantinas let us say, but this is very rare.

Our men don't go into the local bars too much and the reason for this is another policy we have in this camp which is a little different from some of the others. We tell the men that if they want to buy beer and bring it back here and drink it here, that this is O.K. with us. We feel that this should be as close as possible to being in their own homes and nobody objects to a man drinking quietly in his own home. We feel that this way we avoid a lot of trouble, not only do the men tend to spend less money on drinking than they would in bars, but it also eliminates the likelihood of brawls and so forth. If we find a man is drinking excessively, we get rid of him just as soon as possible, that is as soon as his contract runs out. We operate only with short term contracts here, that is six weeks contracts subject to renewal if we

still need the man, and if he has a good record. We keep personnel records on every man in camp. We know all about him; what kind of a worker he is; whether he has gotten into any kind of trouble, including ~~drinking~~ problem drinking; the men are aware of the fact that we keep these records and we figure that if a man is really interested in staying in this country and working, that he will keep his nose clean. I must say that the percentage of those that we have to repatriate on account of excessive drinking or anything of that kind is never very high.

When you have a specialized population like this, consisting of unattached males, you are naturally going to find that some of them get very hungry for female companionship. This will be true if the group consists of American soldiers, or Mexican braceros, or anybody else; I don't care who it is, there is bound to be a certain amount of tom-cattling ~~around~~ around. This leads to a certain amount of competition with the younger generation Mexican-Americans and perhaps this is one of the reasons why the younger generation generally tends to be less receptive to the braceros than the older folks. The second generation definitely looks down on the braceros and this naturally enough arouses some resentment on the part of the braceros themselves. The older folks, however, who still have memories of Mexico and who like to have those memories refreshed, tend to get along very well with the Nationals. But, anyway, speaking of female companionship; these men are as free as you or me within certain limits, there are certain counties within which they may move about without any restrictions so long as they report back to work at the proper time of work, ~~unless~~ of course. So you will find a good many of them get all slicked up on weekends and take off. We don't know where they are going for sure, and it is none of our business. I imagine that many of them have ~~in~~ girl-friends in Los Angeles. I will say though, that very few of them marry local girls, and there are several reasons for

this. In the first place, we don't encourage them and even more important probably, is the fact that contracts are generally too short to permit them to go through the whole process of courting and becoming engaged and so forth. The priests are a very helpful stabilizing influence in this ~~the~~ sphere also, and another stabilizing influence, is the fact that many of these men have relatives in the immediate area with whom they can visit, ~~xx~~ and we make it a policy to encourage these relatives to come into the camp and visit the men here. If, in spite of all the obstacles that are placed in their way, they do get married here; they will have relatively little trouble coming back to the U.S. on a visa after being repatriated. This is providing that they have a good record, that is if they have never been in trouble with the law or anything of that sort; under these conditions, I understand that the average waiting period for a bracero who has returned to Mexico and has a wife here in the U.S., is only about two months. This is a far cry from what most Mexicans have to go through if they want to get a visa.

We get on an average of about a dozen letters a day from men who have worked with us before, asking if they can come back and work with us again. It is possible to arrange this, although difficult. There is an awful lot of red-tape to go through to insure that the man will be channeled to us, but in many cases we feel that the trouble is worthwhile, because these men are the very cream-of-the-crop. They know how we do things here, and we know what kind of workers they are, because as I have said, we keepd records. So, I would say that we manage to bring back approximately 150 men per year who have worked for us before.

In somewhat the same way we like to encourage continuity in our grower membership. This is a very tightly knit association, more so than any other that I know of; and as a result of this characteristic, I am able to carry out a policy which I think is extremely important. As

important in the operation of this program, as getting good workers in the first place and that is educating the growers in how to use their workers. I am only in the camp office about one-third of the time. The rest of the time I am out in the field talking with our growers, conducting this half of the overall educational program. I will give you an idea of ~~how~~ how this sort of thing can pay dividends: Before I came here, I was working with the U.S. Employment Service up in Oregon. There was a little valley up there that was entirely dependent upon its apple crop. There must have been 1500 small growers in this falley, about half the population of the valley. The year before, these growers had lost a million and a half boxes of apples, because they couldn't get them picked. They were desparate and so they brought in about a thousand braceros the next year. They did it even though they weren't very happy about the idea. They were highly prejudiced at first; they were fearful about what might happen to their wives and daughters with this many Mexicans on the loose in the area--they had heard a lot of wild stories I guess about the Mexican character. The whole program could have broken down if these prejudices had been allowed to go on unchecked, but I went in there and I spent the whole season working with these growers; and I must say that working side by side with many, in effect, were the braceros themselves; they are the best possilbe ambassadors. There is no meanness; no rowdiness; no nosiness; among them. The result was that when it came time for the braceros to leave this little valley everybody was genuinely sorry to see them go. They had been good business for the merchants of the area, and they had behaved themselves like perfect gentelemn, and of course they had ~~is~~aved the apple crop.

It has been my experience that the people who have had the most trouble adjusting to the coming of the braceros have been certain of the crew leaders and foremen, the great majority of whom are Mexican-American. Some of these people simply couldn't seem to get along with the nationals.

I would try to oriente them in the same way that I would the growers, but some of them just couldn't seem to get through their heads what I was driving at. so we had to fire some. Now, things are going along smoothly. Our crew leaders are able to work equally well with crews made up of braceros or domestics, and we frequently have crews which are made up partly of one and part of the other. There used to be some friction within the crews when they were mixed in this way, but when this happens I ~~think~~ attribute it to the crew leader basically. And now that we have our crew leaders straightened out we have no trouble between the members of the crews.

~~Then~~ I am absolutely convinced that this program is having a profound effect upon the men who come up here and through them upon Mexico as a whole. These men are learning a great deal about methods of agriculture, and about health and sanitation, and about politics, and about everything that you could name. It is compressing 50 years or more of social development into a matter of a few years. I could give you many, many examples; I have already mentioned some, but here is another: We had a man here last year who got the idea of getting water from deep wells and ~~up~~ pumps. This, of course, was suggested by ~~in~~ his work among the citrus crops. When he got back to Mexico, he went into this business. We had a letter from him not long ago, he is making 500 pesos a day; meaning that he is a very wealthy man by Mexican standards. It is estimated that one hundred million dollars per year is going down to Mexico as a result of the Bracero Program. This estimate seems reasonable enough when you figure that there are nearly five hundred thousand men and this would be an average saving of only \$200 per man. We have a man in this camp right now, who has a savings account in a local bank amounting to \$4,000.

These men are getting educated. The great bulk of them, whatever you

you may hear from other people, are eager and anxious to learn---everything. In some cases too eager. They are fascinated by cars, for example, but they have not had the background of our local boys who have been tinkering with cars since their early teens. The braceros don't know how to care for their cars; they don't know how to drive, but that doesn't stop them from trying. And we consequently have a number of accidents. On the more ~~positiv~~ positive side, you can say that illiteracy is dropping rapidly. In my opinion illiteracy is less than half of what it was in 1943. During the school year we have English classes right here in the camp. A teacher is sent out by the Covina School District, Adult Education Division; and this gets a very good response. At first it seems that everybody is interested, then when they find out how much work is involved and how difficult the subject really is, some naturally drop out. Those that remain are really serious students, and I would say that we have between 25 and 50 of these each year.

We have not conducted any classes in reading and writing Spanish, although this would not be a bad idea. I am sure you would find a lot of the men leaping at this opportunity, also. A few years ago, we ~~had~~ did have one national who had been a teacher in Mexico. He was conducting an informal sort of classes in his barracks for his immediate neighbors who might like to learn how to read and write, and I think that this was getting a very good response.

These men may not have had much schooling, but they are not stupid, by any matter of means, believe me. They have a great deal of native intelligence. Over and over again I have growers tell me that they can teach their men all the tasks that are required quite readily, even though the grower himself may not speak a word of Spanish and his men may not speak a word of English. You have to be pretty sharp to catch on this way under these conditions, because some of the jobs involved are not by any means simple.

Doctor Baro of Azusa, has been our camp doctor for about two years. Twice a week he comes into the camp and we have a regular sick-call arrangement. He is able to take care of the simple colds and things like that right here. If there are more serious cases they are taken to his office for laboratory work or whatever maybe required. If a man gets sick at some other time of the week, we take him directly to the doctor's office. The doctor, incidentally, handles both non-occupational and workman's compensation cases. If we can't get hold of Doctor Baro, he has always made arrangements for some other local doctor to handle his cases. So, for 24 hours a day the men have medical care if they need it. If some acute emergency comes up, there is the Covina Emergency Hospital right close and we simply phone them and they send an ambulance out, and later the man can be transferred to a permanent hospital or whatever maybe required.

All this is bound to have an effect on Mexico. I don't see how it could fail to. I will mention just one more way in which, I am absolutely certain that the Bracero Program has produced change in Mexico. 10 years ago Mexicali was just a crummy, little border town, that amounted to nothing. Today, Mexicali is a boom-town with well over a hundred thousand population. The reason for this is that many of the braceros brought their families up there so that they could be nearer to them and the whole family has remained there; and if the man is no longer employed as a bracero, he has gone into industry or construction in Mexicali. Exactly the same sort of thing is now happening in Empalhme, where as you know the contracting station that used to be located in Mexicali is now located.